

Richfield Oil Building  
555 S. Flower Street  
Los Angeles  
Los Angeles County  
California

HABS No. CA-1987

HABS  
CAL,  
19-LOSAN,  
67-

PHOTOGRAPHS

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

ADDENDUM  
FOLLOWS...

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

RICHFIELD OIL BUILDING

HABS No. CA-1987

Location: 555 S. Flower St., Los Angeles, CA 90017

Present Owner: Demolished, 1968-1969

Brief Statement of Significance: An excellent example of the "Modern Style" of the 1920's, a short-lived heroic style with roots in late Art Nouveau and German Expressionism with emphasis on masses rather than volumes. A more direct influence on the forms came from two New York buildings whose profile was determined by the 1916 Zoning Law requiring setbacks for multi-story buildings.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: Completed in 1929. Although published in various journals in 1930, the buildings' interior was modified before occupancy due to the fact that Richfield Co. was taken over by a receivership on 1/15/1931 and numerous changes were made to increase space for rentals to outside tenants.
2. Architects: Morgan, Walls and Clements, Los Angeles
3. Original plans, construction, etc.: Original plans now at the office of Robert Clements, architect and son of Stiles Clements of Morgan, Walls and Clements.
4. Original and subsequent owners: Atlantic Richfield Co., sole owner.
5. Alterations and additions: Plans for first alterations were dated 2/15/31. These indicated an increase of car parking space in the basement garage for use of tenants and partition changes to accommodate tenants. Plans dated 12/1934 provided even more space for tenants. Alterations were done by Morgan, Walls, and Clements.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Richfield Oil Building, by Morgan, Walls and Clements was one of the best examples of the twenties which integrated the arts into architecture. It reflects the style growing out of the New York setback laws of 1916, which fruited then died in the thirties. This style combined cubism, applied art and exterior color. Like Raymond M. Hood's Radiator Building (1924) in New York, the skin of the Richfield Building was black and gold.
2. Condition of fabric: Demolition was begun on the building in November, 1968, to make way for new facilities of Richfield-Atlantic Oil Co. Demolition was completed in the spring of 1969.

B. Description of the Exterior:

1. Dimensions: 119'4" from N to S; 120' 8" from E to W. 12 stories above ground plus 3 basement levels and a penthouse structure. The mass of the building is square in plan. Floors 3 to 9 are U-shaped with the open side to the west. Floors 11 and 12 are 0-shaped with the western portion bridging the gap below. A 5 story addition was added on the southwest corner of the building in 1953-1954.
2. Foundations: Poured concrete.
3. Wall construction, finish, color: The exterior is finished with a black terra cotta tile over brick on the east and south walls, the NE end of the north elevation, and the SW end of the west elevation. The remainder of the N & W elevations are of black concrete with a fluted surface and with ashlar markings to correspond to the terra cotta work on the other elevations. The exterior walls are black to prevent undue contrast with countless windows which might destroy the mass or silhouette.
4. Structural system, framing: The building is of steel skeleton construction. The columns being of H-sections set in concrete measuring 2' square, the beams of I-sections in concrete. The concrete is added for fireproofing. Concrete slab floors are used throughout.
5. Porches: The entry passage is framed in a segmental arch measuring 10'10" wide and 2'2" high. The entry vestibule is 21'7" high. The entrance to the underground parking facilities at the northeast corner of the building is marked by a decorative lintel.
6. Chimneys: None.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and Doors: The major entrance to the structure is off Flower St. Doors to the rental spaces on the first floor are located in the various bays of the south and west elevations. All doors are hollow metal and glass.
  - b. Windows: Ground floor: East and south elevations have  $\frac{1}{4}$ " polished plate glass windows. Second floor: The windows at this level have a double glass sash with fixed plate glass and wired glass in metal frame. The heads of the windows of the third and twelfth floors are arched.
8. Roof: The roof is flat with a slight slope for drainage. Cornice: The top of the main block of the building is ringed with a 5' parapet and 9' figures in black terra cotta. The parapet of the tower structure is 6' high. The terra cotta work is colored black, blue and gold.

Roof - cupolas, towers:

The penthouse tower (83' x 28' x 41' high) contains 3 levels (fan room, elevator machine room, and tank room.).

The metal "sign" atop the penthouse measures 60' x 20' x 50' high. These structures are located just north of the light court in the center of the building and have broad sides facing north and south.

A 130' beacon tower with searchlight for guiding airplanes capped the structure.

9. Fire Escapes:

A projecting fire escape is located on the north side of the building about 20' back from the east corner; a recessed fire escape is located on the east wall (2nd bay) about 20' or 25' from the southeast corner. A photograph of 1968 shows the fire escape on the north side removed.

10. Miscellaneous exterior features:

Terra cotta is used extensively on the exterior of the building. At the eleventh floor, terra cotta figure panels conceal light reflectors. Terra cotta panels also conceal reflectors at the tenth floor level. At the first floor level (south and east elevations) terra cotta ornament is located above plate glass store fronts and is extended up above the entrance arch. This ornament also conceals recessed light reflectors. Sections of the terra cotta wall surface are broken by countless shallow vertical flutes or ribs  $1\frac{1}{2}$ " wide. Metal grilles cover the windows on the west end of the north court wall.

C. DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERIOR

1. Floor plans (by floors):

a. -Mechanical basement (lowest level); elevation 240.50'.

The plan at this level is T-shaped with the leg to the south. It measures 63'-11" from north to south and 120'-8 $\frac{1}{2}$ " from east to west. This level contains the boiler room to the west, a general machinery room, water softener room, salt storage room, switchboard room, transformer vault, tool room, engineer's office, and four elevator pits in the cross arm of the T. The stairhall, automobile elevator, elevator machine room are in the leg of the T.

b. -Sub-basement; elevation 256.00':

This is the first rectangular floor plan, measuring 120'-8 $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 129'-0". This level is used primarily for parking with access via central vertical circulation core, located just north of the center of the building. Four passenger elevators serve this level. Also located in this center core are the stairhall and two auto elevators. A fan room is located in the NW corner and an auto wash rack is found in the SW corner.

c. -Basement; elevation 267.50':

This level is also set up for parking with automobile access along the north side of the building ramping down from Flower Street on the east. Autos enter this level on the north wall at the NW corner. A garage office is located in this corner. The vertical circulation system serves this level with the four western of the six elevators in the bank, and with a stairhall to the south of the elevators. The two automobile elevators to the south of the core link this level to the sub-basement. Other services which are provided and which fill up the NE corner of the plan are: a fan room, the elevator operators' room, men janitors' room, women janitors' room, mens' and womens' toilets and storage room. The plan was altered in 5/29 with the revised arrangement including an office, mailing room, and janitors' storage room. An auto wash rack is found in the SW corner.

d. -First floor; elevation 279.25':

The entrance to the elevator lobby is located on the east side of the building, just north of center. The lobby itself extends east to west with a bank of elevators (6) on the south side and a cigar counter on the north. This circulation area is located to the north of center of the building. The main stairhall is situated at the west end of the elevator lobby. Other stairs are located behind the elevators, giving access via the stairhall to the basement, and at the SE corner of the lobby, giving access to the mezzazine level. On the north side of the building is located the entrance and exit ramps to the garage. The rest of the first floor is rentable store space. The original working drawings left these spaces undesignated and undeveloped. Additional drawings of 1929, indicate the placement of a florist's shop in the NE corner.

e. -Mezzazine:

A mezzazine was provided in the original designs, but was left undeveloped. Additional drawings of 1929, indicate a barber shop was to be located on this level in the NW corner of the building with access from the elevator lobby. Other mezzazine spaces were to be related to the rented store spaces.

f. -Second Floor; elevation 303.50':

Vertical circulation continues. Additional stairway introduced behind the elevators at the SE corner of the building, linking this level with the third floor. A double-loaded corridor in the shape of a J serves the offices. Between the corridor and the exterior walls are the offices of the company. In the SW corner of the plan is the main accounting room (about 60' x 70').

g. -Third Floor; elevation 315.25':

The U-shaped plan at this level has a double-loaded corridor of the same configuration. There is a reception room situated on the north side of the elevator lobby. Offices are located between the corridor and the exterior walls. A light court is situated within the U-plan, having a glass surface to provide light to the spaces below. There is no access to this court.

h. -Floors #4 through #10:

These levels are similar in planning arrangements to the third floor, varying only in details of office spaces.

elevations: 4 - 326.00'  
5 - 336.75'  
6 - 347.50'  
7 - 359.25'  
8 - 371.00'  
9 - 382.75'  
10 - 394.50'

i. -Eleventh floor; elevation 406.25':

This plan is O-shaped with the west wall bridging the space below. The double-loaded corridor is U-shaped.

j. -Twelfth Floor; elevation 418.00':

This plan is also O-shaped; it has an L-shaped corridor. On this floor is the Assembly room (ca. 40' x 80') at the south side of the building. Service space for the Assembly Room include the serving room and the kitchen to the west. In addition there are two private dining rooms in the NW corner and service facilities for the building. These include a barber shop, dressing room, rubbing room, showers and steam rooms, womens' lounge, and hospital room all situated along the north and east walls.

k. -Penthouse tower structure: Fan room on 1st level: elevation 433.75'. Elevator Machinery Room on the 2nd level: elevation 457.00'. Tank room on the 3rd level: elevation 470.00'.

2. Stairways:

Main stairway is situated at the west end of the elevator lobby providing circulation from the first floor to the penthouse structure. It is a dog-leg stair with 7" risers and 11" treads ( typical dimensions for all stairs). A second stairway links the first floor to to the third and is located behind the elevator bank. It is also a dog-leg stairway.

A U-shaped is located about 25' south of the last mentioned stairway and is positioned at the inside corner of the east and south corridors intersection. It rises from the fourth to the eleventh floor.

Another U-shaped stairway is located directly across the east corridor of the last mentioned stair at the eleventh floor. It links the eleventh and twelfth floors.

Other stairways in the building include those connecting the basement levels:- between the mechanical basement and the sub-basement access is allowed by a scissor stair located behind the elevator bank; between the sub-basement and the basement, access is by a scissor stair in the SE corner; between the basement and first floor, access is by a straight run stairway located behind the elevators.

Stairs between the first floor and the mezzazine level include an L-shaped stairway in the SE corner of the lobby. A stairway not shown in the original drawings, but included in the revised details of 5/29, gives access from the elevator lobby to the barber shop; it is located in the NW corner of the lobby. Other stairways to the mezzazine level are included within the rental spaces and are not indicated on the original drawings.

3. Flooring:

First floor: Marble surfaces in lobby (Belgian black, light French Napoleon, dark French Napoleon, forest green, yellow Verona).

On other levels, floor surfaces are finished in patterned rubber tile in all public spaces and corridors. The remaining floor surfaces are unspecified on the drawings. There are designations of wood flooring to be used in some of the offices.

4. Walls:

The elevator lobby on all floors is finished in marble, Keene cement (an extremely hard, durable, white gypsum plaster), and plaster. Office interiors are finished in either wood veneered panels (for executives) or in lath and plaster.

5. Ceilings: Ceilings are finished in plaster, either molded in elaborate patterns (found in public areas), or plain in less public areas.

6. Doorways and Doors:

The doors on the interior of the building vary with the function and with the floor on which they are found. In general, they are single doors with one panel, and are of wood, hollow metal, or metal and glass. Widths vary from 1'-6" (for cabinets, etc.) to 3'-4" for the single doors. The heights are most commonly 7'-0", with thicknesses of 1 3/4" or 2". The door jambs are either of Keene cement or marble, though some wood jambs are used.

7. Decorative features and trim:

There is a profusion of marble, Keene cement, plaster and ornamental metal work throughout the building's public spaces. Some wood trim is employed in the more important offices. All designs are moderne and stylized. Contemporary designs revealing the role of the petroleum industry are evident upon entry into the building as the entry doors had metal grilles with figures of the automobile, airplane, tanker, etc. on them. Model airplanes stood on pedestals to the sides. Over the entrance arch were four figures also holding objects associated with the industry.

The elevator lobby on the first floor abounded with richness of materials and design from the inlaid marble floor to the carved plaster ceiling. Notable are the elevator doors and panels which had abstract patterns in relief in the metal surface.

The Assembly Room was the other major area of decorative attention. The room had inlaid floors, wood paneling on the window wall and entrance arches, and marble inlaid panels next to the stage. The ceiling had recessed light fixtures. Cast iron grilles in moderne design covered register openings. Metal plaques, plaster cornices and carved marble moldings are a part of the public areas, especially the elevator lobbies, of the building.

8. Notable hardware:

Though this is not communicated in the Architects' original drawings, it appears that standard hardware items were used for doors, windows, etc.

9. Lighting:

Electric lighting used throughout. On the exterior walls at the 2nd, 10th, and 12th floors are recessed flood lamps employed to throw light up into the exterior window recessed.

Interior lighting is not communicated in the drawings except in some of the public spaces. The fixtures used in these instances are usually wall or ceiling mounted incandescent. Recessed lighting is used in the Assembly Room on the 12th Floor.

10. Heating:

Central heating with the boiler in the basement. Heating registers are situated at the perimeter walls. The architects' drawings indicate use of radiators at these exterior positions. They also include air and return air registers for the ventilation system in the early years. Air-conditioning was added later.

SITE AND SURROUNDINGS

General Setting:

The building is located on the Southwest corner of the intersection of South Flower Street and West Sixth Street. The site is an L-shaped parcel with 175' fronting on Flower (east); 167.68' on the north; 121.35' fronting on Sixth; 125' on the west. There is a 50' x 46.31' extension at the NW corner. The main entrance is located on Flower Street.

Landscaping:

The building is located in an urban surrounding. There is no landscaping. The sidewalks (finished in rubber tile) extend from the face of the building to the curb (12' on the west, 18' on the south).

Prepared by: Robert C. Giebner, Project Supervisor  
HABS, Southern California Project II  
(prepared after the destruction of the building from the original drawing of the office of Morgan, Walls, and Clements, dated November, 1928, ff., and from photographs, taken prior to destruction, by Marvin Rand for the HABS. The building was destroyed beginning November, 1968 and completion of the demolition came in the spring of 1969.

Date of report: July and August, 1969



Addendum to  
Richfield Oil Building  
555 S. Flower Street  
Los Angeles  
Los Angeles County  
California

HABS No. CA-1987

HABS  
CAL,  
19-LOSAN,  
67-

PHOTOGRAPHS

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D. C. 20240